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Generals Who Contradict the Contras

If We Don't Know What We're Doing in Nicaragua, Let's Stop Doing It

By George C. Wilson

UNITED STATES POLICY for Central America reaches what President Reagan says is a crucial crossroads this Tuesday. That's when the House is scheduled to vote on whether to send \$100 million to the contras who are challenging the Sandinista government of Nicaragua.

But one group of retired U.S. military leaders who have actually fought wars do not see this crossroads as leading anywhere at all, militarily, whether the contras get the money or not.

After having spent years digesting the lessons of the Vietnam War, these professionals look at Central America and despair. Just as in Indochina, they see no clear military or political objective; no long-range policy, just tactical moves day by day. They feel sure, from their battlefield experience, that 15,000 to 25,000 contras cannot unseat the Managua government whether they get the \$100 million or not. So the \$100 million looks to them like conscience money—an alternative to bugging out on the contras right now; a something-is-better-than-nothing reaction.

Some U.S. military leaders do indeed consider another \$100 million for the contras an investment in the future of the region. But even Gen. Paul F. Gorman, former commander of the U.S. Southern Command, found himself on the defensive when asking for contra money last year: "Is there any reasonable likelihood that this military force can defeat the military force in Nicaragua?" Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) asked Gorman in his farewell appearance before the Senate Armed Services Committee. "Not in the foreseeable future," Gorman replied. He portrayed them as irritants, not victors, declaring: "My Salvadoran colleagues are entirely convinced that if it were not for the Sandinista opposition—the freedom fighters—the Salvadorans would have significantly increased military problems."

Two respected soldier-statesmen like Gen. Bruce Palmer Jr., such a rationalization is not a policy. Palmer, in an interview representative of several others conducted with military professionals, shared his concerns about Central America. He spoke from the perspective of a general who, before retiring in 1974, commanded the troops former President Lyndon Johnson sent to the Dominican Republic, fought in Vietnam, ran the Army as vice chief of staff, advised presidents, and wrote a book entitled "The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam."

"I think Nicaragua is probably gone," Palmer says. "Once dictators get in government, they dig in to control everything. Nothing short of a big effort can get them out. The time to intervene has passed. It's too late without starting a war, and we're not ready for that." Of the idea of using the contras, to overthrow the Sandinista government in Managua, he says, "It's ridiculous. It's sending a boy to do a man's job."

The fundamental weakness in the administration's position on Central America is lack of objectives, says retired Col. Harry G. Summers Jr., a soldier in and historian of the Vietnam War, now an analyst at U. S. News and World Report. "The objective is not only the first principle of war, it is also the most important, for all else flows from it. It asks the basic question, 'What are we trying to accomplish?'"

Despite these problems, says Palmer, if he were in the House of Representatives, he probably would vote for the \$100 million as a symbol and then "look for better people to support. The contras already are discredited. We certainly don't want to get mixed up with Samoza guards. There is no such thing as covert action anymore." National leaders must go public with their concerns in Central America and "publicly warn" what they will not tolerate, he argues.

Retired general E. C. Meyer, former Army chief of staff, says he agrees with Palmer right down the line, adding he can't tell what the Reagan administration's objectives are in Central America but "if the objective is to try to cause an internal overthrow" of the Sandinista government, "it's not something that can be done through military means. You do it through people power, as was the case in the Philippines."

Retired lieutenant general Roy Thurman, former deputy director of the Army's training and doctrine command, says he, too, has been unable to figure out the military and political objectives in Central America. He joined other military professionals in calling for less guns and more butter for the region. Rather than split the \$100 million for the contras 70-30 in favor of military aid, Thurman recommends a reversal of those priorities.

Historian Summers also points out the weakness of the United States getting involved in another "coalition" war—one like Vietnam where a super-power is trying to work in concert with an underdeveloped nation. "In order to gain public and congres-

sional support for U.S. involvement, the American political leadership has a tendency to inflate the value of the coalition partner and to publicly announce that insurgent threats to the survival of the coalition partner also threaten the survival of the United States. The ally thus gains an erroneous perception of its own importance and may come to believe that the United States is permanently and irretrievably committed to its support."

Both active and retired military leaders have told me that they believe it is just a matter of time before the United States stops aiding the contras, no matter what Congress does in the coming week. One four-star general, in confiding those fears, said he would vote for the \$100 million as a matter of conscience and then look for a way to pension the contras off while setting down clear national objectives in Central America.

In light of their battlefield and political experiences, a cross-section of professionals said it was time to take the following steps to give U. S. efforts in Central America a direction:

- Draw a clear line outside of Nicaragua itself, that the Sandinistas can't cross. The United States would serve notice that it would oppose any effort by Nicaragua to overrun its neighboring countries. "We should draw the line and say this is it," Palmer said. "We have to keep hammering on the fact that this is close to home; that the Western Hemisphere is our base."
- Declare that any new offensive weapons

introduced into Nicaragua will be destroyed by the United States. Several generals noted that the Reagan administration's warnings to Managua against introducing MiG fighter planes into Nicaragua have proved effective. Military officials would like to see this doctrine applied to other sophisticated weapons as well. Instead, current thinking is that if something like an advanced Soviet helicopter is introduced, we should escalate by giving the contras advanced, "smart" antiaircraft missiles.

- Increase financial assistance to friendly Central American countries and stress economic over military aid. Gorman's master plan called for creating jobs by building defense plants in the region. "I am convinced that in countries like Panama, Costa Rica and Salvador, even in Honduras, it would be possible to undertake, for example, a great deal more of defense-related electronics subcomponent assembly, the preparation of industrial fasteners and other modest tasks for defense prime contractors that are now being performed elsewhere overseas," Gorman told Congress. He noted in that context that 5 percent of the administration's security-assistance budget for fiscal 1986 was earmarked for all the friendly Latin American nations, compared to 27 percent for Israel.

If President Reagan or his successor should decide to go to war to remove the Sandinista government, this could not be done by subcontracting out the job to rebels, as was the case in the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion, stresses Palmer. He recalled that after that invasion by CIA-sponsored forces, U. S. military planners focused on how much force it would take to topple Fidel Castro. It appeared to be a modest task at first, Palmer notes, but ended up with a plan calling for five U. S. divisions, or almost 100,000 men.

He estimates it would take "a couple of divisions" to take over Nicaragua but warns against expecting the native population to rally and help the invaders, as was assumed before the Bay of Pigs invasion. "You've got to do it yourself rather than depending on people rallying. Once they see who's going to win, then they rally," the old soldier says.